

# Myth, Reality and Revelation: The Performance of Divine Power on Dartmoor

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*This article explores the nexus between the folk heritage of an unusual archaeological site, an early modern account of ‘ball lightning’, and the literary construction of an affective atmosphere. It examines how a violent storm in October 1638 provided a symbolic reservoir for narrative accounts of both the performance of God’s power and the Devil’s trickery, thereby providing lessons for civil conduct alongside explanations of some unusual archaeological features. Tracing a biographical life history of how the storm has been remembered at different periods since the event, we chart how various narratives of landscape can unfold over several centuries.*

## I. The Great Storm of 1638: Heritage Process and the Affective Register of Emotional Experience

Upon Sunday the 21. of *October* last, In the parish Church of *Wydecombe* neere the *Dartmoores* in *Devonshire*, there fell in time of Divine Service a strange darknesse, increasing more and more, so that the people there assembled could not see to reade in any booke, and suddenly in a fearefull and lamentable manner, a mighty thundering was heard, the ratling whereof did answer much like unto the sound and report of many great Cannons, and terrible strange lightening therewith, greatly amazing those that heard and saw it, the darknesse increasing yet more, till they could not see one another; the extraordinarie lightening came into the Church so flaming, that the whole Church was presently filled with fire and smoke, the smell whereof was very loathsome, much like unto the sent of brimstone, some said they saw at first a great fiery ball come in at the window and passe thorough the Church, which so affrighted the whole Congregation that the most part of them fell downe into their seates, and some upon their knees, some on their faces, and some one upon another, with a great cry of burning and scalding, they

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all giving up themselves for dead, supposing the last Judgement day was come, and that they had beene in the very flames of Hell.<sup>1</sup>

Sunday 21 October 1638 was a stormy day, with heavy rain and strong winds. Many people sheltered from the storm in the church in Widecombe-in-the-Moor. All of a sudden, the ceiling of the nave collapsed and crashed down, as a pinnacle from one of the towers toppled and smashed through the ancient roof of the church (figure 1). The falling debris killed four people (with two further deaths over the following days), including Sir Richard Reynold's warrenner from the rabbit farm close to Warren House Inn. This is all recorded in the church records, and is one of the earliest archival records of what is thought to have been ball lightning.<sup>2</sup>

Environmental and meteorological historians in the twenty-first century might well mark this as an early description of ball lightning but the contemporary accounts seem to be more intent on the reactions of those present; that they were 'fearefull', amazed and filled with lament. From reading the contemporary accounts, one can understand the congregation's astonishment:

[T]he lightening seized upon [Minister Lyde's] poore Wife, fired her ruffe and linnen next to her body, and her cloathes; to the burning of many parts of her body in a very pitifull manner. [...] Beside, another woman adventuring to run out of the Church, had her cloathes set on fire, and was not only strangely burnt and scorched, but had her flesh torne about her back almost to the very bones. Another woeman had her flesh so torne and her body so grievously burnt, that she died the same night. [...]

[O]ne man more, [...] who was Warriner unto Sir *Richard Reynolds*, his head was cloven, his skull rent into three peeces, and his braines throwne upon the ground whole, and the haire of his head, through the violence of the blow at first given him, did sticke fast unto the pillar or wall of the Church, and in the place a deepe bruise into the wall as if it were shot against with a Cannon bullet.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Wykes, *A Second and Most Exact Relation of those Sad and Lamentable Accidents, which happened in and about the Parish Church of Wydecombe neere the Dartmoores in Devonshire, on Sunday the 21. of October last, 1638* (London: R. Harford, 1638), pp. 5–6.

<sup>2</sup> See also Stephen H. Woods, *Widecombe in the Moor: Pictorial History* (Tiverton: Devon Books, 1994). Ball lightning is a rare atmospheric electrical phenomenon, associated with violent thunderstorms. First reliably observed and measured scientifically as recently as 2014, ball lightning typically appears as a 'glow, ranging from the size of a golf ball to several metres across. There are many historical reports of such "fireballs" injuring or even killing people and setting buildings alight, and they have sometimes been given supernatural explanations'. Philip Ball, 'Focus: First Spectrum of Ball Lightning', *Physics*, 7.5 (2014) <<https://physics.aps.org/articles/v7/5>>. See also Jianyong Cen, Ping Yuan, and Simin Xue, 'Observation of the Optical and Spectral Characteristics of Ball Lightning', *Physical Review Letters*, 112 (2014), 035001 <<https://journals.aps.org/prl/abstract/10.1103/PhysRevLett.112.035001>>.

<sup>3</sup> Wykes, *A Second and Most Exact Relation*, pp. 7–8.

Thomas Wykes's account of the events at Widecombe Church is not a sober and disinterested record of events, but a relation of people being amazed and confused, not to mention their severe mental and physical trauma; a story of terror and fear as a strange meteorological event causes people to be confounded. Furthermore, and perhaps in a manner that is comparable to how hurricanes, floods and typhoons are reported today, it is an event that garnered a great deal of interest and excitement, both locally and nationally. Put simply, it generated extraordinary press coverage to sate a popular appetite for a subject matter that is both appalling and irresistible. Knowledge of this meteorological occurrence, therefore, comes to us due to its nature as a literally 'astonishing event'. In narrative form, the event has an ensuing biography of its own, repackaged and retold to effect and reflect a changing emotional terrain. That biography may be seen to trace the process by which the storm developed from what Igor Kopytoff would term a 'singular' event into a 'commodity'—with potential value for the parishioners of Widecombe who were present, but also for printers and publishers nationwide, and subsequently for other communities at later historical periods.<sup>4</sup>

Following a short introduction to Dartmoor as a contemporary heritage—or *rural-historic*—landscape, this article unpacks the idea of heritage being seen as a processual resource with an ongoing 'life history'.<sup>5</sup> We then turn to the biography of the Great Storm of 1638 traced through newspaper and other literary reports in the immediate aftermath, situating it within the early modern era. The paper explores how storm narratives become intertwined with romantic and folkloric notions, coalescing through an act of curatorship to produce a heritage landscape. Finally, the article examines how a particular archaeological landscape feature is adopted into this affective process as part of a place-making practice.

## II. Heritage on Dartmoor: A Short Contextual Note

Though often attached to tangible artefacts, heritage is not a physical *thing*, but a 'present centred *process*', through which notions of the past are placed in the present, often with a sense of purpose for a future.<sup>6</sup> This discourse of heritage

<sup>4</sup> Igor Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. by Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 64–91.

<sup>5</sup> For work on the rural-historic landscape, see Catherine Palmer, 'An Ethnography of Englishness: Experiencing Identity through Tourism', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 32.1 (2005), 7–27; Steve Watson, 'Country Matters: The Rural-Historic as an Authorised Heritage Discourse in England', in *Heritage and Tourism: Place, Encounter, Engagement*, ed. by Russell Staiff, Robyn Bushell, and Steve Watson (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 103–26. For work on the life history of heritage, see David C. Harvey, 'National Identities and the Politics of Ancient Heritage: Continuity and Change at Ancient Monuments in Britain and Ireland, c. 1675–1850', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 28.4 (2003), 473–87.

<sup>6</sup> For heritage as a *process*, see David C. Harvey, 'Heritage Pasts and Heritage Presents: Temporality, Meaning and the Scope of Heritage Studies', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 7.4 (2001), 319–38; David C. Harvey 'A History of Heritage', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, ed. by Brian Graham and Peter Howard (Basingstoke:

corresponds to a sort of performance of *past-ness* as a place-making practice.<sup>7</sup> Drawing from and developing ideas about the processual life history of heritage, this paper explores the biography of an event, recounted, used and memorialized over 380 years, with acts of writing, publishing and reading corresponding to an affective engagement with the landscape.<sup>8</sup> Different versions, both over the immediate three months following the event as well as over centuries since, therefore, reveal a dynamic affective register, as meanings and interpretations change—from a performance of divine power, to a demonstration of natural phenomena, to a pantomime of devilry. Repeated in prose and poetry, folkloric tradition, through monumental and even landscape inscription, the narrative of the event reflects a situated emotional life history, understood within changing social and cultural contexts. Working at Stonehenge, Barbara Bender notes how the exploration of sequential narratives of the past can bring life to the site.<sup>9</sup> Correspondingly, by tracing the life history of a storm event on Dartmoor, we hope to produce a lively story that is profoundly productive (see Figure 2 for location map).

At the risk of sounding like a clichéd tourist guide, *the past is all around you on Dartmoor*. The same slightly banal expression can be used, of course, about anywhere, in the sense that everywhere has ‘a past’—a truism that highlights the fact everywhere can only actually be experienced in the present, whenever that present takes place. However, a visit to Dartmoor in the early twenty-first century will find an early twenty-first century landscape, marketed and actively ‘preserved’ in a fashion that encourages the visitor to believe that they are taking a ‘step back in time’, and certainly to accept that the past is deeply engrained within the present: the *Visit Dartmoor* website, for instance, introduces the moor as a ‘ancient landscape’ that is ‘unspoilt’, and invites tourists to ‘journey into the past’.<sup>10</sup> How ‘ancient’ Dartmoor really is, is less important than how it can support a heritage discourse that can structure the way meanings and value are recreated.<sup>11</sup> As Catherine Palmer notes, what is important is not *what is*, but rather *what is*

Ashgate, 2008), pp. 28–56. See also Laurajane Smith, *The Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Emma Waterton, ‘More-than-representational Landscapes’, in *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies*, ed. by Peter Howard, Ian Thompson, Emma Waterton, and Mick Atha, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 91–101.

<sup>8</sup> Harvey, ‘National Identities and the Politics of Ancient Heritage’, David C. Harvey ‘Cultures of Antiquity and the Practice of Archaeology in Britain and Ireland (c. 1700–1850): A Postcolonial Perspective’, in *Contemporary and Historical Archaeology in Theory*, ed. by Laura McAtackney, Matthew Paulus and Angela Piccini (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2007), pp. 55–61.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Bender, *Stonehenge: Making Space* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> See Visit Dartmoor <[www.visitdartmoor.co.uk](http://www.visitdartmoor.co.uk)> [accessed 25 February 2019].

<sup>11</sup> Laurajane Smith, ‘Deference and Humility: Social Values of the Country House’, in *Valuing Historic Environments*, ed. by Lisanne Gibson and John Pendlebury (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 33–50 (pp. 35–36). For work on heritage and discourse, see chapters 8 and 9 in Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Methods*, 3rd edn (London: Sage, 2012).

perceived to be.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the Dartmoor landscape provides a backdrop for a heritage discourse that has a history, and which is enacted in various ways. When seen through this conceptual lens, the landscape of Dartmoor provides the ingredients for the staging of an affective atmosphere in which the past becomes tacitly 'present', sometimes in a visceral and even jarring or uncanny manner.<sup>13</sup>

As well as the blurring of temporal boundaries, Dartmoor is also composed in a manner that blends myth and reality. Dartmoor is a place of legends and industrial remains, fables and geological features, ghosts and cattle grids: a space of the imagination. Dartmoor is a place that has tremendous affective potential as connected stories circulate and sensationalize, titillate and terrify. *Visit Dartmoor* describes the moor to visitors as a 'magical' landscape, while *Devon Life* has promoted the area as 'otherworldly'.<sup>14</sup> Within such a context, an event that had a literal and visceral ability to astound, and to produce emotions of fear, terror, pity, and amazement, has a tremendous power and resonance, both for the contemporary population that experienced it, and as a resource to be deployed within various societal contexts ever since. Drawing on Jane Bennett, therefore, Dartmoor can become a space of enchantment, where a condition of exhilaration or acute sensory activity can transfix or 'transport by sense, to be both caught up and carried away'.<sup>15</sup>

The events at Widecombe church on Sunday 21 October 1638 provide a heritage resource or reservoir of affective capital that resonates through an emotional register, blending myth and reality, mental trauma and spiritual sensibility, within both a material and immaterial world. This event both affirms and reflects an affective terrain that has both spatial and temporal dimensions. Put simply, the affective meaning of the event changes as the news circulates, locally and nationally, and the interpretation of the event alters through time both in the short and longer term. Many people who were present at it were physically and mentally traumatized by the experience, while others were prompted to undertake a quasi-scientific investigation. Some people, however, seemed to have a more opportunistic response – an eye to make some money from the sensation and perhaps even the ghoulish interest that the event stirred up nationally: to turn

<sup>12</sup> Catherine Palmer, 'Touring Churchill's England: Rituals of Kinship and Belonging', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 30.2 (2003), 426–45 (p. 431).

<sup>13</sup> For work on the staging of affective atmosphere, see Mikkel Bille, Peter Bjerregaard and Tim Flor Sørensen, 'Staging Atmospheres: Materiality, Culture and the Texture of the In-Between', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 15.1 (2015), 31–38, and Shanti Sumartojo and Sarah Pink, *Atmospheres and the Experiential World: Theory and Methods* (London: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> *Visit Dartmoor*; *Devon Life*, 19 March 2004 <[www.devonlife.co.uk](http://www.devonlife.co.uk)> [accessed 25 February 2019].

<sup>15</sup> Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 5. Indeed, for Bennett, even fear can play a role within this enchantment, being able to produce a surprise that can invoke a feeling of *Unheimlichkeit*: that uncanny 'feeling of being torn out of one's default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition' (p. 5).

it from event into commodity.<sup>16</sup> It is to the immediate aftermath that the paper now turns, as news of the event reached London and became a publishing mini-sensation.

### III. Making Sense of the Event in 1638: Circulation of the Narrative in the Seventeenth Century

The first account of the storm at Widecombe was printed in London just twenty-seven days after the incident, on 17 November 1638, composed of material drawn from

the letters of Ministers and other men of quality and good account and credit living not onely in the Parish of *Withicombe*, but in the adjoining Parishes and places, and by those that had the full relation from Master *Lyde* his own mouth.<sup>17</sup>

It was attributed to Wykes and a ‘Master Rothwell’ (who was claimed to be the church warden of Widecombe church) and must have sold out within hours, since the pamphlet was reprinted on 19 November.<sup>18</sup> A more detailed version was printed ten days later, again attributed to Thomas Wykes, but this time proclaiming that the account was ‘not grounded on information taken up at second hand’ but instead contained first-hand accounts: ‘those persons being now come to *London*, who were eye witnesses herein, and the chieftest discoverers of the effects of the terrible accidents; although thou hadst the truth in part before, yet not the tithe thereof’.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, in the ten days between 17 and 27 November, there was sufficient public interest in the Widecombe storm to warrant this second publication—and perhaps the cost of transporting eyewitnesses from Devon to London. Published on 27 November, the ‘new and improved’ account was more expensive (‘the price be more’) and claims greater authority than the previous version. Indeed, the idea of *bearing witness* seems clear, reflected in the provision of more quotidian detail as well as relating greater nuance in the immediate emotional response.

The new account contains far more detail about the actual structure of the church, the nature of the congregation and close detail about the way that the lightning bolt ricocheted around the building and ‘tooke all the lime and sand of the wall’.<sup>20</sup> Largely, however, the account works through recounting the strangeness of the various elements of the episode, mostly through the seeming arbitrariness of the effects. So, while the terrible event is put down to a performance of God’s power and judgement, there is also a sense of fascination with the unusual

<sup>16</sup> On this process see Kopytoff, ‘Cultural Biography of Things’, pp. 64–68.

<sup>17</sup> Wykes, *A True Relation of those most strange and lamentable Accidents happening in the Parish Church of Withycombe in Devonshire on Sunday the 21. of October. 1638* (London: R. Harford, 1638).

<sup>18</sup> *The Two Widecombe Tracts, 1638 Giving a Contemporary Account of the Great Storm, Reprinted with an Introduction*, ed. by J. Brooking Rowe (Exeter: Commin, 1905), pp. iii–iv.

<sup>19</sup> Wykes, *A Second and Most Exact Relation*, sig. A3<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Wykes, *A Second and Most Exact Relation*, p. 15.

elements: some people burnt, others not, metal objects melting, skin scorching but clothes untouched. We are all sinners and the victims are not ‘greater sinners than our selves’;<sup>21</sup> they are unfortunate victims of the arbitrariness of Revelation’s judgement. People who survive are merely left to ‘thank the Lord’ for his mercy:

to search our hearts and amend our waies is the best use that can bee made of any of GODS remarkable terrors manifested among us. When GOD is angry with us, it ought to be our wisdom to meete him, and make peace with him.<sup>22</sup>

The description of the events is located within a realm of understanding that the world’s end was nigh and God’s judgement impending. The account of the disaster is both violent and exact: some suffering terrible and sometimes mortal injuries, while others are unscathed. There is a strong element of bearing witness, but also a sense of wonder and curiosity at the uncanniness of the effects:

And one Mistresse *Ditford* sitting in the pew with the Ministers wife, was also much scalded, but the maid and childe sitting at the pew dore had no harme. [...] Also one Master *Hill* [...] had his head suddenly smitten against the wall, through the violence whereof he died that night, no other hurt being found about his body; but his sonne sitting in the same seate had no harme.<sup>23</sup>

The implication places the event squarely within the realms of God’s Providence, but the actual first-hand accounts mostly concern ‘oddities’—particularly of people uninjured when one would expect them to be hurt. Indeed, when describing how no children were hurt, the account notes how two children were found walking hand-in-hand down the aisle, not ‘frighted’ at all, suggesting their absolute innocence.<sup>24</sup> Within this fearsome astonishment about the end of the world and the wrath of God, these contemporary accounts also contain elements of newsworthy sensation. One can get a flavour of this through Wykes’s description of the ‘multitudes’ who came to Widecombe to view the damaged church from ‘divers places thereabouts’, suggesting that the site had become a tourist attraction locally.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, however, as the account develops, one can detect elements of scientific curiosity and perhaps even a recourse towards notions of ‘reason’.

Reflecting Geoffrey Parker’s account of a growing ‘spirit of reason’ in the later seventeenth century, there is, perhaps, a trace of unspoken conversation within the passages of this account, as ideas of ‘revelation’ become blurred with a quasi-scientific autopsy of the event.<sup>26</sup> This dialogical process comes through

<sup>21</sup> Wykes, *A Second and Most Exact Relation*, p. 36.

<sup>22</sup> Wykes, *A Second and Most Exact Relation*, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> Wykes, *A Second and Most Exact Relation*, pp. 7–8.

<sup>24</sup> Wykes, *A Second and Most Exact Relation*, p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> Wykes, *A Second and Most Exact Relation*, p. 31.

<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).



strongly in the long account, not in the original pamphlet, about David Barry's venturing up the dangerously damaged tower, after the storm, to investigate its condition.<sup>27</sup> Barry, the factor of a local estate, together with the Sexton enters the church and climbs the tower:

[A]s they ascended, there came downe the staires a most loathsome smell beyond expression, as it were of Brimstone, pitch and sulphur; hee notwithstanding adventured higher.<sup>28</sup>

Barry finds

a round patch as broad as a bushell, which looked thick, slimy and blacke, and blacke round about it, to which hee put his hand, and felt it soft, and bringing some thereof in his hand from the wall, came downe the staires to the people, and shewed them that strange compound, all much wondered thereat; and were affrighted, none knowing what it might bee.<sup>29</sup>

Set against popular understandings of the event as a dramatic performance of divine power, Barry stands out as an interesting figure who seems to have sought to reinterpret the event as a natural phenomenon—describing, collecting, measuring, and displaying for an assembled audience the 'strange compound' created by the ball lightning. Barry himself, however, was to become subject to the dominant interpretation of the event as supernatural. The account by Wykes and Rothwell recounts how the following night the man had a series of nightmares that caused him to be sick: 'at last came up such loathsome vomit that smelt of the same nature as that did which he brought out of the Steeple'.<sup>30</sup>

This is the Summe of those dismall accidents and terrible examples happening in the place aforesaid. And the maine drift in the publication of this great Judgement, is for thy humiliation and edification, not onely to acquaint thee with the great and mighty works of God's Power and Justice, who in a moment can doe mighty things to us, and arme the creatures against us at his owne pleasure, but also to moove pitty and compassion in us towards our Brethren who were patients therein, not judging them greater sinners then our selves; but beleeving, *That except wee also repent and sinne no more, wee shall likewise perish, or worse things befall us.*<sup>31</sup>

The investigation carried out by Barry has the hallmarks of a self-conscious performance of positivist science and suggests the development of Enlightenment empiricism. Ultimately, however, his gesture towards an empiricist reading of the

<sup>27</sup> Wykes, *A Second and Most Exact Relation*, pp. 27–35.

<sup>28</sup> Wykes, *A Second and Most Exact Relation*, p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> Wykes, *A Second and Most Exact Relation*, pp. 33–34.

<sup>30</sup> Wykes, *A Second and Most Exact Relation*, p. 35.

<sup>31</sup> Wykes, *A Second and Most Exact Relation*, p. 36.



event was contained: the man's own (alleged) sickness ironically being enlisted as evidence for a Christian interpretation of the events.

Ball lightning was not understood (although a fragmentary attempt was made to establish some material truths), but the undiscerning vagaries of divine justice were unambiguous. The technology of the printing press and nascent national media sector allowed the news of the episode to circulate around the country, to supply evidence of God's providence and warning of coming Judgement for all people. In this part of Devon, the event provided the symbolic resources that could be deployed in support of a certain world view that could be sustained through its very reference to real places, people and landscapes.<sup>32</sup>

The Widecombe storm also quickly found its way into poetic form. Two, and perhaps three, of those who had witnessed the event were quick to capitalize on its potential value as an event that had generated public interest, by producing poetic accounts of it. Richard Hill, the village schoolmaster, at some point in the aftermath of the event produced a four-verse poem in rhyming couplets, 'The Great Thunderstorm', which was inscribed on tablets and displayed on the wall of the restored church. The tablets were there in 1701 when John Prince visited the church and commented on their 'tedious' poetry,<sup>33</sup> but they were replaced with new boards in 1786, and only a fragment of the original now survives, so there is no way of knowing whether the verses were 'improved' at that time.

Rev. George Lyde, the vicar of Widecombe, who was officiating at the time of the thunderstorm, has also been claimed to have produced a poem about the event. Prince, in his 1701 biography of the cleric, quotes the concluding six lines of a poem that he asserts was written by Lyde:

Oh! Bless'd be God! For ever bless his name!  
Which hath preserv'd us from that burning Flame!  
Oh! Let the Voice of Praise be heard as loud,  
As was the Thunder breaking through the Cloud.  
Oh! Let the Fire of our Devotions flame  
As high as Heaven, pierce the celestial Frame.<sup>34</sup>

There is, however, no earlier reference to this poem.<sup>35</sup> Whether or not Lyde did ever versify about the storm, Rothwell, the churchwarden of Widecombe, certainly

<sup>32</sup> For reflection on the symbolic work that heritage discourses can do, see Smith, *Uses of Heritage*; and Smith, 'Deference and Humility', p. 35.

<sup>33</sup> John Prince, *Danmonii Orientales Illustres: or, The Worthies of Devon* (Exeter: Farley, 1701), p. 449.

<sup>34</sup> George Lyde, 'A short Description of the Parish of Wydecombe in the Moor, together with a plain Narrative of the truth of that wonderful Word of God's wonderful Power and Mercy, shewed unto the Inhabitants thereof the 21st Day of Octob. being Sunday A.D. 1638', cited in Prince, *The Worthies*, p. 449.

<sup>35</sup> An entirely different poem was also attributed to Lyde in 1876, in Robert Dymond, *'Things New and Old' Concerning the Parish of Widecombe-in-the-Moor and Its Neighbourhood* (Torquay: Torquay Directory Company, 1876). Dymond claimed that this poem, printed in his book 'for the first time', had been found in a trunk that had once belonged to Lyde. He also

does seem to have produced an account in verse. On 4 December 1638, a seven-page poem attributed to ‘Rothwell and Bake’ and titled ‘A true Relation in Verse, of the strange accident which hapned at Withycombe in Devon-shire’, was printed as an appendix to John Taylor’s account of a hurricane that had swept across the West Indies in August of 1638.<sup>36</sup>

Rothwell and Bakes’s poem introduces the Widecombe incident by talking about the great flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the plagues of Egypt as other examples of God destroying sinners.<sup>37</sup> The account, therefore, is very much at odds with the two earliest accounts of the storm (and Hill’s poem) where there is no sense that those injured were any more ‘sinners’ than anyone else.<sup>38</sup> Written in rhyming couplets, Rothwell and Bakes’s account represents a more prestigious literary form than the prose accounts of the previous month, perhaps pitched at a more literate audience. Rather than reflecting a ‘located’ and thoroughly ‘Dartmoor’ experience, the poetic rendition (in which the account is slightly contorted to fit the style), together with its relation to a hurricane in the West Indies, acts to transform the Widecombe storm into an exciting but somehow generic event. The storm is still literally ‘sensational’, but the location of its affective capacity appears less rooted and less visceral.

#### IV. Contextualizing the Circulation of the Event

As Philippa Maddern, Joanne McEwan and Anne M. Scott state, ‘emotions are not universal or ahistorical’.<sup>39</sup> This suggests that we should both make space for a plurality of emotional responses, but also that we should try to situate our understanding of those responses within a complex spatial and temporal context. In other words, we should treat everyone as situated individuals, whether they witnessed the event first-hand, or through media reports—whether they were in Widecombe or in London. Indeed, the multiplicity of reactions even in the immediate aftermath is clearly reported in the first pamphlet, which records how Minister Lyde exclaims that there is no better place to die than inside the Church—to which the congregation responds by running for their lives, out of the church with masonry falling around them.<sup>40</sup> Clearly, the immediate reaction from members of the congregation appears to reflect a more earthly instinct than poor old Minister Lyde’s, who had just witnessed his own wife being set on fire!

claimed, somewhat improbably, that elderly people living in Widecombe could still recite lines from the poem.

<sup>36</sup> J. Taylor, *Newes and strange newes from St Christophers of a tempestuous spirit, which is called by the Indians a hurry-cano or whirlwind* (London: J[ohn] O[kes], 1638).

<sup>37</sup> Taylor, *Newes*, p. 13.

<sup>38</sup> Wykes, *A Second and Most Exact Relation*, p. 36.

<sup>39</sup> Philippa Maddern, Joanne McEwan, and Anne M. Scott, ‘Introduction: Performing Emotions in Medieval and Early Modern Worlds’, in *Performing Emotions in Early Europe*, ed. by Philippa Maddern, Joanne McEwan, and Anne M. Scott (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), pp. xii–xxx (p. xv).

<sup>40</sup> Wykes, *A Second and Most Exact Relation*, p. 12.

While we must treat people as individuals, however, we also need to locate this truism within the contemporary social and cultural context. In other words, 'it is impossible to overemphasise the importance of the cultural milieu within which emotions are expressed'.<sup>41</sup> So, how is it possible to make sense of these events at Widecombe within the context of the mid-seventeenth century, while making room for distinctions between individuals, and assumed differences and similarities between Widecombe, London and elsewhere?

Recounting an experience of a tornado in Delhi in 1978, Amitav Ghosh reports how those who experienced the strange and improbable meteorological event were completely confounded.<sup>42</sup> So unfamiliar was a tornado in this region of India that at first, people literally did not know what to call it. Even the newspapers lacked the vocabulary, since what happened made no sense to the people experiencing the event—it was beyond their present understanding and experience. Instead of falling back on the scientific 'facts' of what happened, therefore, we must make space for the cultural context in which the event happened in order to understand what things are perceived to be, rather than what they are.<sup>43</sup>

While most of the congregation seem to have reacted by running for their lives, they were living in a world that was very much apprehended as something divinely orchestrated. Europe in the early seventeenth-century was experiencing a period of climatic deterioration, known today as the 'Little Ice Age'. A range of contemporary accounts make it clear that seventeenth century societies generally recognized these climatic changes, and usually ascribed these changes to divine intervention—a sort of Godly messaging service to inform humanity of the coming biblical revelation, instilling a 'Reformation of Manners'.<sup>44</sup> Parker's work on this provides several examples of how these environmental changes were perceived in the seventeenth century:

Every day I hear news of war, plagues, fires, inundations, thefts, murders, massacres, meteors, comets, spectrums prodigies, apparitions and such like, which these tempestuous times afford. (Robert Burton, 1638)

Sometimes Providence condemns the world with universal and evident calamities; whose causes we cannot know. This seems to be one of the epochs in which every nation is turned upside down, leading some great minds to suspect that we are approaching the end of the world. (Nicandro, 1643)<sup>45</sup>

The seventeenth century was a time of global crisis: Russian and Ottoman empires

<sup>41</sup> Maddern, McEwan, and Scott, 'Introduction', p. xix.

<sup>42</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), pp. 11–15, for Ghosh's recollection of the 1978 Delhi tornado, which killed around thirty people and injured more than seven hundred.

<sup>43</sup> Palmer, 'Touring Churchill's England', p. 431.

<sup>44</sup> See Bender, *Stonehenge*, p. 135.

<sup>45</sup> Cited in Parker, *Global Crisis*, p. xix.

were close to collapse and a series of religious wars were fought in a context of absolute religious conviction. Perhaps around a third of the population of Europe died, with the 1640s being one of the coldest decades ever reliably recorded.<sup>46</sup> Turning from these Europe-wide generalities to some specific cases of how extreme weather might be interpreted within rural England, however, an account of a storm in Bungay (Suffolk) in 1577 provides an interesting comparison with the events in Widecombe. As in Widecombe, the congregation sheltered in the church; lightning struck and some people were killed. An account by Abraham Flemming in 1577 provides a visceral relation of how the key ingredients of belief in divine providence and otherwise inexplicable meteorological events can combine to co-ordinate an emotional environment of fear and revelation:

God warneth us by signes from heaven, by fierie apparaunces in the aire moste terrible. [...] But wee will not be warned, wee will tumble still upon the bedde of wantonnesse, and drinke our selves drunck with the wine of sensualitie.<sup>47</sup>

This is a world of shaking and fear; fear of a very real spectre that the end of the world is nearing. Emotions of astonishment drive a feeling of actual ‘terror’, and ‘awe’ of God: God as a literally ‘awe-some’ being.

God open the eyes of our hartes, that wee may see in what Wildernesses, among what wilde Beastes and devouring Serpents wee doo wander: and give us mindes mollified and made soft, that at his woorkes we may feare and bee astonished.<sup>48</sup>

In this context, the ‘emotion’ expressed and experienced by people in the church seems to have been connected to a literal belief that the end of the world was around the corner. For many people, the display at Widecombe may have acted to strengthen belief—perhaps for Minister Lyde the events might be interpreted as a justification of faith, a performance of divine power, and a validation of one’s place in the world.

### **V. Instilling the Narrative: Memorializing the Story in the Eighteenth Century and the First Appearance of the Devil**

As we have seen, an account of the storm was displayed in verse form within the church itself from at least 1701 (figure 3). The Great Storm of 1638, therefore, should be seen as a ‘heritage reservoir’, symbolic of the values that a certain section of society holds as important,<sup>49</sup> and which could prompt both personal reflection and perhaps ministerial guidance within the parish community.

<sup>46</sup> Parker, *Global Crisis*, pp. 3–25.

<sup>47</sup> Abraham Flemming, *A straunge and terrible Wunder wrought very late in the parish Church of Bongay* (1577), sigs A2<sup>v</sup>–A3<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>48</sup> Flemming, *A straunge and terrible Wunder*, sig. A3<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>49</sup> Smith, ‘Deference and Humility’, p. 35.

In token of our thanks to God, these tables are erected,  
 Who in a dreadful thunderstorm our persons here protected  
 Within this church of widicombe, 'mongst many fearful signs  
 The manner of it is declar'd in these ensuing lines.  
 In sixteen hundred thirty eight, october twenty first,  
 On the Lords day at afternoon, when people were addrest  
 To their devotion in this church while singing here they were,  
 A Psalm distrusting nothing of the danger then so near:  
 A crack of thunder suddenly, with lightning hail & fire;  
 Fell on the church and tower here, and ran into the choir:  
 A sulphurous smell came with it, & the tower strangely rent,  
 The stones abroad into the air, with violence were sent.

The versified account within the eighteenth-century church contains the vestiges of an ongoing dialogue. While the account does not include the quasi-scientific investigation that is reported in Wykes's earlier account, there is clearly a fascination with the unusual effects of the lightning:

One man had money in his purse, which melted was in part.  
 A key like wise which hung thereto, and yet the purse no hurt,  
 Save only from some black holes, so small as with a needle made.  
 Lightning some say, no scabberd hurts, but breaks & melts ye blade.

Furthermore, there is perhaps a hint of dialogue that seems to redeem the parishioners of Widecombe. In contrast to the various 1638 accounts published in London, rather than simply proclaiming that the congregation was being punished as 'sinners', one element of the tablet verses implies that the lightning strike was natural and that God protected the people in the church:

The wit of man could not cast down so much from of the steeple,  
 Upon the church's roof, and not destroy much of the people:  
 But he who rules both air and fire, and other forces all,  
 Hath us preserv'd bless be his name, in that most dreadful fall.  
 If ever people had a cause, to serve the Lord and pray,  
 For judgment and deliverance, then surely we are they.

As well as being circulated locally via the verses on the wall of the church, the storm had an ongoing biography in the form of published works during the eighteenth century. In 1701, Prince's *The Worthies of Devon* was printed in Exeter. Prince was a Devon resident—the vicar of Totnes and Berry Pomeroy.<sup>50</sup> *The Worthies* is a collection of Devon biographies spanning the period from before the Norman Conquest to the end of the seventeenth century. George Lyde, clergyman, is included—although Prince explicitly states that the Widecombe storm was 'the chief ground of my inserting him here'.<sup>51</sup> Prince's account of Lyde's life quotes

<sup>50</sup> Prince, *The Worthies*. Prince was also a figure embroiled in scandal: *The Worthies* was written as a money-making scheme at a time when he had been suspended from his living because of sexual allegations against him.

<sup>51</sup> Prince, *The Worthies*, p. 447.

the 1638 description of the storm. It then goes on to speculate at length about its causes. Prince concludes that: ‘The Cause may be considered two ways, either according to Philosophy or Divinity. The Natural and Philosophical Cause of such Devastations is Thunder and Lightning’.<sup>52</sup> As the Theological Cause, he asserts

that is very often the Wrath and Justice of Almighty God, for tis certain, what one truly observes, such dreadful Thunders and Lightnings don’t arise by Chance, or the mere motion of matter, nor ought to be referred to pure Natural Causes, but are sometime produced by the immediate Direction of Almighty God, and he may permit Evil Spirits who have undoubtedly a great power in the Air, their Chieftain in H. Scripture, being called, The Prince of the Power of the Air to raise Storms and Tempests, and to scatter abroad Thunders and Lightnings, to mischief what they can the Children of Men. For though the holy Angels are often the Ministers of God’s Grace and Benefaction to the World, yet we doubt not but that he uses the Evil Ones as his Beadles and Lictors to execute his Wrath upon the Children of Disobedience.<sup>53</sup>

Prince builds on the 1638 poem in suggesting that the Widecombe storm was an act of divine punishment—but he importantly adds to this by introducing into the story ‘the Prince of the Power of the Air’, or, in other words, the Devil. Prince then speculates about the purpose of the thunder and lightning at Widecombe, presenting a series of possible natural and supernatural explanations, including ‘the Amendment and Reformation of all’.<sup>54</sup> In discussing this possibility, he is careful to avoid explicitly claiming the Widecombe parishioners were sinners, but still strongly suggests this: ‘we dare not say, the Inhabitants of this place were greater Sinners than others; yet this we may, that God was pleased to punish them in this manner, to be an admonition of amendment unto others’.<sup>55</sup> In the following sentence (as if to make up for this), he then describes the parishioners as ‘pious’ for having hung the tablets about the storm on the walls of the restored church (he does describe the poetry as ‘tedious’, however).

Prince’s introduction of the Devil into the story had an influential legacy, as *The Worthies* was widely read until the end of the nineteenth century. His account of the storm was quoted in at least five eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts.<sup>56</sup> Of these, some angrily dismiss his speculations about the Devil (Richard Polwhele), some do not mention them (John Page and Sabine Baring-Gould), and some quote them without comment (Robert Dymond). Indeed, Prince

<sup>52</sup> Prince, *The Worthies*, p. 448.

<sup>53</sup> Prince, *The Worthies*, p. 448.

<sup>54</sup> Prince, *The Worthies*, p. 449.

<sup>55</sup> Prince, *The Worthies*, p. 449.

<sup>56</sup> Prince’s account is quoted in Richard Polwhele, *The History of Devonshire* (Exeter: Trewman, 1793); Robert Dymond, *Things New and Old* (1876); John Lloyd Warden Page, *Exploration of Dartmoor and its Antiquities* (London: Seeley, 1889); Samuel Rowe, *Perambulation of the Antient and Royal Forest of Dartmoor* (Plymouth: Rowe, 1896); and Sabine Baring-Gould, *Book of Dartmoor* (London: Methuen, 1900).

remained the main source that other writers went to for the Widecombe story even after Wykes's second 1638 account of the storm had been reprinted in the mid-eighteenth century, and again in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>57</sup>

At the end of the eighteenth century, the Cornish antiquary Polwhele added a folkloric detail to the story, which also seems to have had a long circulation. In a chapter on Devonshire's 'Air and Water', in *The History of Devonshire*, Polwhele quotes Prince's account of the man whose head was split open, and then adds his own detail: 'the hair of his head [...] stuck fast to a pillar near him, where it remained a woeful spectacle a long while after'.<sup>58</sup> The brains, he elaborates, were 'so deeply sunk into it (said the sexton who shewed me the church) that every attempt to wash out the stain was ineffectual. And the only experiment was to plaister the stones'.<sup>59</sup> This account suggests that Polwhele had visited the church as a tourist, a good 160 years after the storm, and that the locals were still telling stories about the event at that period.

A century later, the account of the stained stone was alluded to again in Samuel Rowe's 1896 *Perambulation of the Antient and Royal Forest of Dartmoor*. Rowe's text states of the man's brains splattered against the stone pillar: 'the bloody evidence of his guilt and punishment, as it was believed, remained for a considerable period'.<sup>60</sup> In the mid-twentieth century, children in Widecombe also seem to have been told that pink marks on the church pillars were 'the stain of the blood from the brains of those killed'.<sup>61</sup> It is interesting to speculate what role Polwhele's text had in the life of this legend: whether it originated in *The History of Devonshire* or (as he claims) the story really had been told to him by a local sexton; and also whether Polwhele and/or Rowe were still being read in and around Widecombe in the 1930s–1940s, or whether the story of the pink marks was simply circulating in oral form at that time.

## VI. The Storm in the Nineteenth Century: Gambling Sinners and an Anthropomorphized Devil

The tradition of writing in verse about the Widecombe storm was resurrected in 1826, when N. T. Carrington's *Dartmoor: A Descriptive Poem* was published—152 lines of which describe the events of October 1638.<sup>62</sup> Carrington's is a standard account of the storm, but it does add the poetic (and theologically significant)

<sup>57</sup> Wykes's account was included in *The Harleian Miscellany: A Collection of Scarce, Curious, And Entertaining Pamphlets And Tracts*, ed. by Samuel Johnson and William Oldys (London, 1744–1752). From there it was reprinted again in Dymond, 'Things New and Old' (1876).

<sup>58</sup> Polwhele, *History of Devonshire*, p. 11.

<sup>59</sup> Polwhele, *History of Devonshire*, p. 11.

<sup>60</sup> Rowe, *Perambulation*, p. 154.

<sup>61</sup> Widecombe resident Freda Wilkinson recounted this in her 2003 talk to the Widecombe History Group (transcript published <[www.widecombe-in-the-moor/history/minutes/2003](http://www.widecombe-in-the-moor/history/minutes/2003)> [accessed 25 February 2019]).

<sup>62</sup> N. T. Carrington, *Dartmoor: A Descriptive Poem* (London: John Murray, 1826).



detail of a rainbow that allegedly appeared above Widecombe after the storm has passed—implying that the storm was a punishment for some sort of general sin, and therefore hearkening back to Rothwell and Bake's 1638 poem, which compared the storm to the great flood.

In 1876, the local historian Dymond made a conscious attempt to once again commodify the storm when he produced a history of Widecombe, with the storm occupying the book's central chapters, in order to raise funds for the restoration of the parish church.<sup>63</sup> Dymond's *'Things New and Old' Concerning the Parish of Widecombe-in-the-Moor* brought together many different sources: Thomas Wykes's second account of the storm; Prince's speculations about its cause; a full transcript of the poem by Hill that still appears on the walls of the church; and a poem supposed to be by Lyde, which refers paradoxically (indecisively) to both God *and* the Devil's orchestration of the storm:

The Lord was pleased for to direct the stones  
As not to hurt, much less to break men's bones. [...]  
Nor was the devil idle all the season,  
The prince that ruffles in the airy region.  
To set on work what wit and malice might  
Act or invent, to end our days outright.<sup>64</sup>

Where Dymond included material attributing the Widecombe storm to both the Devil's interference and God's involvement, Page, in his *Exploration of Dartmoor and its Antiquities*, recounted only the diabolic version of the story (though he scoffed that Prince, a divine, and also Joseph Hall, bishop of Exeter, should both have believed the tale literally, in the previous century).<sup>65</sup> Dymond also dramatically anthropomorphized the Devil, recounting how:

A woman who kept the inn at Poundsgate avers that a rider mounted on a coal-black steed called at her house on the day in question, and inquired the road to the village. Unwittingly she told him, and was immediately after horrified at the liquor which he drank hissing as it passed down his throat. Seeing that he was discovered, the fiend galloped off for Widecombe, and entering the church, espied a youth who was indulging in a nap. [...] Satan [...] seized the unhappy wight, and flew with him, amid thunder and lightning, through the roof to the top of the tower, where his horse was fastened to a pinnacle. What with the struggles of the youth, the horse and the devil, the pinnacle crashed down upon the congregation, while horse, rider and burden vanished in the sulphurous gloom.<sup>66</sup>

Seven years later, Rowe also anthropomorphized the Devil and further elaborated on the sins of those in the church. In his 1896 *Perambulation*, Rowe (who was

<sup>63</sup> Dymond, *'Things New and Old'*.

<sup>64</sup> Dymond, *Things New and Old*, p. 105.

<sup>65</sup> Page, *Exploration of Dartmoor*, pp. 214–15.

<sup>66</sup> Dymond, *Things New and Old*, p. 214.

born and brought up close to Dartmoor, in Brixham) claimed that during his childhood, ‘The tale passed current, that either a thunderbolt or a terrific minister of wrath in an unearthly form, was sent to inflict condign vengeance on one who was presumptuously playing at cards in his pew’.<sup>67</sup> Rowe cites Prince as the source of this story. However, Prince nowhere mentions card-playing, so either Rowe originated the story himself, or the tale had its origins in oral folklore. The latter is perhaps suggested by the fact that in William Crossing’s early twentieth-century account of the Widecombe storm, although it is inflicted on the church because of a member of the congregation sleeping, when that sleeper is carried away, playing cards nonetheless fall from his hands—suggesting the co-existence of a rival tradition, and an attempt to accommodate it here.

### VII. The Storm in the Twentieth Century: The ‘Devil’s Playing Cards’

One night, Jan Reynolds, a tin miner of bad character, paid the price of selling his soul to the Devil. [... At Widecombe Church] the Devil turned on a spectacular natural firework display; a thunderstorm of high drama with exploding claps of thunder and enormous bolts of lightning flashed across the sky. Tethering his horse to one of the pinnacles, he burst into the church, seized Jan Reynolds and threw him over his horse. He rode northwards, climbing ever higher into the sky. Not far from Warren House Inn, four of Jan’s cards fell to the ground and formed the small fields known as the Devil’s Playing Cards, the shape of each being recognisable as a different suit of cards. *When the Devil holds the Trump Card*.<sup>68</sup>

Crossing’s 1909 *Guide to Dartmoor* is the first text to name the man whose brains were dashed out against the church pillar as ‘Jan Reynolds’. The name seems to be a confusion of the 1638 account’s claim that the man whose brains were dashed out was ‘Warriner unto Sir Richard Reynolds’, while the forename ‘Jan’ may have been taken from the Jan Pearce who is associated with Widecombe in the song ‘Widecombe Fair’. Crossing’s *Guide* states that:

below Tunhill Rocks [...is] a fine example of a kistvaen [...]. Here it was that the wicked Jan Reynolds once entered into a compact with a stranger, who turned out to be the Prince of Darkness, and failing to keep it became his victim. Seven years after the meeting Jan was discovered indulging in a nap in Widecombe Church on a Sunday afternoon, and it was the appearance of Satan there to claim him that occasioned the great thunder-storm to which we have already referred. Jan was borne away on the fiend’s black steed, when some cards that he held in his hand were dropped on the moor, and are now to be seen, in a transformed state.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Rowe, *Perambulation*, p. 154.

<sup>68</sup> Sally Barber and Chips Barber, *Dark and Dastardly Dartmoor* (Pinhoe: Obelisk Publications, 1988), pp. 7–8.

<sup>69</sup> William Crossing, *Crossing’s Guide to Dartmoor*, 2nd edn (Plymouth, Western Morning News, 1912), p. 318. Crossing also repeated (and embroidered) Dymond’s association of

Rather than the whole episode being seen as a performance of divine power, and unquestionable evidence of God's wrath, here it is now clearly stated that the Devil is to blame. The Devil, in this story is of the 'trickster' variety, and is really quite comical; stopping off for a pint at the pub while on his way to Widecombe; indeed, having to ask directions for how to get to Widecombe! Rather than being a Devil that can *astonish* and generate visceral terror, this is a Devil who can entertain and perhaps titillate, while being a bit scary. The Devil in this story is certainly not a figure to induce the type of fear that might either confirm or invalidate any convictions of faith.

A further element of this story, however, revolves around the specific connection made between the legend of the Devil and a set of oddly shaped fields a few miles to the north of Widecombe, across the road from the isolated Warren House Inn. While Sir Richard Reynold's warrener is named as a victim of God's fury in the seventeenth-century accounts, those accounts do not specifically mention any landforms, ruins, or enclosures near to the Warren House Inn (which before 1845 was situated on the same side of the road as the enclosures). But in the tale of the trickster Devil, the four named enclosures are accounted for.

The four enclosures in question are unequivocally strangely shaped. In their isolated location, without any apparent purpose, they implore questions. According the Devon Historic Environment Record, these enclosures are *probably* post-medieval in origin, and associated with the Headland rabbit warren.<sup>70</sup> Being a statutory body of the state, the Devon Historic Environment Record is clearly not going to account for this feature by recourse to the character of the Devil. However, it is interesting to note that the official archaeological record specifically describes this archaeological feature (record number 1344765) as having an 'approximate diamond plan'. The further notation that the enclosures have no visible entrance adds to the mystery, as does the official equivocation as to their origin: *no-one really knows!*

The enclosure has drystone walls and an approximate diamond plan covering 0.2 ha. There is no visible entrance.

0.45 ha rectangular enclosure, [...] associated with Headland Warren. [...] Their purpose is much debated but they are likely to be involved with the trapping and harvesting of rabbits. There is no visible entrance.<sup>71</sup>

the legend with another Dartmoor landmark—the Tavistock Inn at Pound's Gate. Here (p. 336) it is claimed that: 'It was at this hostelry that the Evil One, in the form of a dark horseman, stopped for refreshment when on his way to Widecombe on the afternoon of the dreadful thunderstorm in 1638, and paid the hostess with money that afterwards turned into dried leaves'.

<sup>70</sup> Devon Historic Environment Record, 'Monument no. 1345193', *Heritage Gateway*, <[www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results\\_Single.aspx?uid=1345193&resourceID=2](http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results_Single.aspx?uid=1345193&resourceID=2)> [accessed 25 February 2019]. Some of these enclosures are first recorded on a map of 1797: 'Map of Part of Shapley Hellion', Exeter, Devon Record Office, DRO 1508M V5.

<sup>71</sup> Devon Historic Environment Record, monuments 1344765 and 1345205, *Heritage Gateway* <[www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results\\_Single.aspx?uid=](http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results_Single.aspx?uid=)

A review of the secondary archaeological literature about these features tends to blend factual documentation with a conscious nod to legend. For instance, Eric Hemery states that:

On the west flank of Bush Down below the tor are the four enclosures known as ‘Jan Reynold’s Cards’—sometimes as ‘The Aces’—from their likeness to playing cards. In the southernmost the miners cultivated fresh vegetables, and in the others the warreners of Headland grew furze as a nutritional food for rabbits. [...] Ruth St Leger-Gordon, in *The Witchcraft and Folklore of Dartmoor*, relates a legend somewhat uncomplimentary to Jan Reynolds, who is said to have been carried off by Satan for playing cards in Widecombe church and dropped the four aces as he and his captor passed over Birch Tor, where they turned into stone on the flank of the hill. Mrs St Leger-Gordon comments that this ‘is the traditional origin of the Ace Fields. One would like to know the actual facts. [...] But legitimate history is silent on this point’. Perhaps the foregoing information, which I can present as ‘legitimate’, may be admitted in breaking that silence!<sup>72</sup>

For Hemery, the (clearly false) legend of the Devil is now used to underline his scholarship. Along the way, the fact that the stories of the Devil are based unequivocally on a real event (the storm in 1638) now seems to be lost—a casualty of how narratives of events change over time to suit contextual circumstance.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, it is perhaps a little frustrating that the ‘good story’ of the Devil’s Playing Cards actually acts to obscure the probable real origin of the four fields in question. Far from being an isolated and wild spot, throughout the nineteenth century this valley, where the Devil’s Playing Cards are located, was a centre of copper mining and the home to dozens of miners, with both the Golden Dagger and Birch Tor mines located within one kilometre of the Playing Cards. Whether the fields were used in earlier rabbit farming or not, the miners seem to have used the small and irregularly shaped fields as gardens. In other words, there is a hint of irony that behind all the stories of romantic mystery, there is perhaps a shadow of other peoples’ lives on the Moor; the marginal—and marginalized—stories and lives of copper workers in the Golden Dagger and Birch Tor Mines.<sup>74</sup> It is unknown whether those miners even noted the unusual shape of the enclosures they used. Given that the Warren House Inn was originally directly above the fields (on the same side of the road) it seems likely that the shape of the enclosures was less obvious before the pub was relocated, creating a clear overhead sightline from the road. Certainly, the unusual shape of the enclosures is not mentioned in

1344765&resourceID=2> and <[www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results\\_Single.aspx?uid=1345205&resourceID=2](http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results_Single.aspx?uid=1345205&resourceID=2)> [accessed 25 February 2019].

<sup>72</sup> Eric Hemery, *High Dartmoor: Land and People* (London: Robert Hale, 1983), p. 612.

<sup>73</sup> Guy Beiner, ‘Disremembering 1798? An Archaeology of Social Forgetting and Remembrance in Ulster’, *History and Memory*, 25.1 (2013), 9–50.

<sup>74</sup> See Chris Philo, ‘A “lyffe in pyttes and caves”: Exclusionary Geographies of West Country Tinnars’, *Geoforum*, 29.2 (1998), 159–72.

guides to the moor (such as Baring-Gould's 1900 *Book of Dartmoor*) published before Crossing's text.

Crossing's guide was written for tourists traversing the moor on foot (it contains repeated instructions such as: 'it will be seen to the left of the track').<sup>75</sup> It was produced in response to 'the development of Dartmoor as a holiday and health resort', and aimed to 'conduct the visitor [...] off the beaten track'.<sup>76</sup> In developing the story of the Widecombe storm, and in linking it with other physical features of the moor, one of his aims might have been rendering Dartmoor as a whole more romantic/mysterious for his readers while giving them instruction on *how to experience* the moor. Whether he invented the landscape associations himself or drew them from oral tradition is impossible to determine, however. Crossing was born in Plymouth, lived for many years on and close to Dartmoor and described himself in the *Guide* as 'really and truly a Dartmoor man'<sup>77</sup> so it is entirely possible that he may have had the stories transmitted to him orally.

### VIII. Conclusions

The 1638 storm provided symbolic capital that was developed and deployed in multifarious ways, as stories of the meteorological event were written down, represented and utilized to suit different needs. These needs include keeping a congregation on the path to salvation, with the stories invoked as evidence of the power of both God and the Devil at different times and in different ways. As a performance of power by an almighty and seemingly vengeful God, emotions of astonishment and literal terror therefore had an affective capacity.<sup>78</sup> In the shadow of these charged ideas about God and the Devil, the extreme rarity of ball lightning was recognized at the time, reflected in the clear sense of curiosity that heralded a nascent scientific investigation in the days following the event.

In addition to these quasi-rational and theological reflections about the nature of the world, however, the event also provided a useful resource from which to make a commercial product. Whether to feed a market for sensational news stories in the seventeenth century or as a romantically desirable consumer product to enchant readers and tourists alike in later centuries, an emotional appeal towards being a concerned citizen, as well as a person of discernment, is apparent. Furthermore, through recourse to magic, the event was used to account for four strangely shaped fields; a story that itself becomes the butt of 'proper archaeological science' in the case of Hemery's book. Indeed, there are perhaps some parallels between the conversations of 'archaeology' and 'folkloric magic' in the twentieth century and those between theological reflection and the vestiges of science and curiosity in the seventeenth century.

<sup>75</sup> Crossing, *Guide to Dartmoor*, p. 318.

<sup>76</sup> Crossing, *Guide to Dartmoor*, pp. i, ii.

<sup>77</sup> Crossing, *Guide to Dartmoor*, p. ii.

<sup>78</sup> For work on the affective power of astonishment, see Charles Rolfe, 'A Conceptual Outline of Contemporary Magic Practice', *Environment and Planning A*, 46 (2014), 1601–19.

The narrative develops over a long period of time (380 years), operating through an affective realm of emotional reaction, countryside curation, and staged theatricality. Shelley Trower talks about how the ‘transformation of orality into print can involve loss’, adding that we should try to ‘resist the romanticization of orality and locality that print paradoxically tends to encourage’.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, what with the attraction of all the stories about the Devil, mysterious landscapes, and holy manifestations, it can be easy to overlook more prosaic and, arguably, more interesting stories. These are stories of quotidian experience, whether of ordinary people rebuilding their parish church in the seventeenth century, or of miners creating small, enclosed garden plots in the nineteenth century. By playing to the gallery of ‘magical, mystical, wild and isolated Dartmoor’, the real lives of ordinary people who lived, worked and died on the Moor, even in a relatively recent era, can sometimes be forgotten.

On a simplistic level, all of these stories can be seen as forms of *place making practice*.<sup>80</sup> By emphasizing the processual nature of such management, therefore, we can identify how the circulation and retelling of the story represents a practice of ‘curation’, reflecting Denis Cosgrove’s suggestion that such resources correspond to ‘an ideologically-charged and complex cultural product’.<sup>81</sup> In tracing the life history of the Great Storm of 1638, we reveal a dialogical form of heritage; a *chiasmus* that blurs timeframes, myth and reality in a fluid and folded manner, in which the (sometimes marginal) voices of ordinary people in the historical landscape are in constant conversation with various other strands and narratives.<sup>82</sup> This is a story of intertextuality—a dialogue between the Church (local and centrally doctrinal), between ‘science’, and between folklore and folkloric romanticists, between tourist literature and ghost books, and more ordinary people trying to make a living in a challenging and marginal British landscape.

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<sup>79</sup> Shelley Trower, ‘Introduction’, in *Place, Writing and Vice in Oral History*, ed. by Shelley Trower (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), pp. 1–19 (p. 5).

<sup>80</sup> Compare Tim Fulford, ‘Romanticizing the West Country: or, Hell Hounds in Hard Cover and Pixies in Print’, in *Place, Writing and Vice in Oral History*, ed. by Trower, pp. 25–40 (p. 26).

<sup>81</sup> Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and the Symbolic Landscape* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), p. 11.

<sup>82</sup> See also Robert Baron, ‘Public Folklore Dialogism and Critical Heritage Studies’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 22.8 (2016), 588–606; and Michelle L. Stefano, ‘Critical Heritage Work: Public Folklore in the US’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 22.8 (2016), 585–87.





*Figure 1.*

Widecombe Church in the present day. (Author's photograph: David Harvey)



*Figure 2.*

Location map situating Devon, Dartmoor and Widecombe-in-the-Moor. (Map courtesy of Louise Hilmar, Aarhus University/Moesgård Museum, Aarhus, Denmark)





Figure 3.

These four painted tablets, fixed to the south wall of the tower in Widecombe Church, date from 1786. They replaced the originals that were in place in 1701, and depict the storm event in poetic form. (Author's photograph: David Harvey)



Figure 4.

Photograph of one of the 'Devil's Playing Cards' (the *Ace of Diamonds*) landscape feature. (Author's photograph: Joanne Parker)